

# 25K Feet *and* Feeling No Pain

by Lt. Eddie Ha

I was in the lead jet of a section of Prowlers on a routine Operation Northern Watch mission. It was my pilot's first flight into northern Iraq and the first time back for the rest of the crew since our previous deployment.

Right from the start of the hop, things did not go as planned. As we taxied, the crew in Dash 2 called and said they would need to jump into the spare. Then our tanker relayed that they were working an aircraft problem. Our planned takeoff time came and went.

We held on deck until our tanker took off. We followed a few minutes later. As we climbed to 25,000 feet, I snapped off my mask to take a drink of water. I felt a little light-headed and asked the pilot to verify the cabin pressure. He responded, "Fifteen thousand feet." I immediately put away my water and re-secured my mask as we leveled off. The oxygen quantity showed 24 liters, and we were all getting good flow. After some discussion, we agreed to continue the mission while troubleshooting the problem.

We checked circuit breakers and recycled switches to no avail. Everybody seemed to be feeling fine, so I accepted the situation and focused on finding the tanker. At that point, I noticed a small leak in my mask across the bridge of my nose, but I was breathing OK and felt fine.

With my attention focused on finding the tanker, now showing 5 DME on the air-to-air TACAN, I had neglected to go through the steps for a cabin-

pressurization failure. Fortunately, another ECMO took up the slack and read the procedure aloud. Still no luck. At four DME on the TACAN, I saw a glint ahead of us about 20 degrees below the horizon. I reached for the handle on the canopy bow with my right arm to pull myself up for a better view, and within seconds, my arm went numb, and the single glint turned into multiple glints. I felt lightheaded as I worked to figure out which glint was the real tanker. I realized my condition and 'fessed up to the rest of the crew.

The mission commander immediately decided to abort the mission as I pushed the oxygen mask more tightly against my face. We turned around and executed an emergency descent to 10,000 feet.

Once on deck, I went to see the flight surgeon. He checked me and put me on 100 percent oxygen for an hour. Having had decompression sickness during a previous chamber ride, I was convinced from my symptoms that I had it again, but, luckily, I was only mildly hypoxic. Decompression sickness could have easily developed from the hypoxia at altitude.

I could have prevented my hypoxic episode. I knew my mask didn't fit. It was loose, and air leaked past the bridge of my nose. I should have spent a few extra minutes with the PRs and had it fitted.

Aviators can get by with a few things not working 100 percent, but the oxygen supply isn't one of them. ✈️

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